

## Ties That Bind by orphan\_account

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**Summary:**

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## **Ties That Bind**

“She has to have something in here.”

El lingered in the doorway as Will stepped into Joyce’s room. Ever since she closed the gate, the two had been spending more time together. Since it was winter break, El was able to spend time at the Byers since the boys were out of school while Joyce and Hopper were away at work.

“El?” Will leaned over until he was able to see her. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

“Oh, well, you can come in if you want to. Maybe you’ll find it before I do.”

El stepped into the room, passing Will who smiled at her before getting back to the task at hand.

She slowly turned in a circle to take in the entirety of Joyce Byers’ room. It was bigger than her own room and was filled with much more. There were drawers and shelves with little boxes and chests that Will was rifling through.

The bed took up a good portion of the room. El moved closer to run her fingers along the quilted comforter.

“Big.”

“What?” Will looked over his shoulder.

“The bed. It’s big.” It was twice as big as her bed back at the cabin.

Will agreed and went back to looking through his mom’s things.

“Why?” El took a seat on the edge of the bed, feeling the springs push back at her.

“I don’t know. Adults usually have bigger beds. Especially parents,

you know.”

El nodded even though Will couldn't see her. His dad would have slept in here too. She knew that Will and Jonathan had a dad but he didn't live with them anymore. She never asked why, but she imagined he must be a bad man like Papa to leave Joyce, Jonathan, and Will.

“Oh, here!” Will swiftly turned around. “I knew she would have some! They're almost the same, but it will work.” He presented two tiny bottles, one in each hand. “Go ahead, pick which one you like.”

El looked between the bottles filled with red liquid and took the deeper shade.

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Joyce pulled into the driveway. She was usually home first, but Hopper's truck parked behind Jonathan's car was a sign of how late she worked. Donald had asked her to stay back to fix some inventory issues with the promise of a shorter shift tomorrow.

As she stepped onto the porch, she could hear everyone inside. She never missed an opportunity to soak in the moment. After another year of monsters and turmoil, she was more than glad to stop and breathe, knowing full well that everyone was safe.

She slotted the key into the lock when it turned out of her grip, unlocking itself. She shook her head with a laugh and let herself in.

The smell of dinner was wafting from the kitchen and the television played the sounds of cheers as one man dodged all the others to make it to the end zone.

“Oh, come on. Get that guy!”

“Hi, Mom!” Will craned his neck to look over the couch from where he sat on the floor at the coffee table.

“Hi, honey.” Joyce stepped up behind the couch to join everyone, smiling at Hopper when he glanced up at her to do the same.

El sat criss cross applesauce squished in next to Hopper with his arm across her lap, her face screwed up in concentration before taking a breather to greet Joyce as well.

“What are we all doing?”

“Painting.” El offered as she lifted the tiny bottle in her left hand.

Joyce smiled and realized what they had gotten into.

“El asked if you had any nail polish. She saw it on TV. I should have asked, but I didn’t think you would mind.” Will got up from the floor to sit on the couch, resting his elbows on the back to face Joyce.

She smoothed a hand over his hair and shook her head. “Of course not.”

“See?” Will offered his hands out to his mother to reveal bright red nails, a little bit of polish on the surrounding skin. “She did good, right?”

“Perfect.”

Will and El became close friends fast, but she expected it. Something beyond everyone’s understanding linked the two children together. They were good for each other.

Joyce smiled at the sight of Hopper willingly letting the young girl paint his nails. “What color did you pick, Hop?”

“I told her to surprise me.” He looked over at Joyce. “Not a full manicure though.”

Jonathan stepped out of the kitchen with a dish towel slung over his shoulder. “Hey, Mom. Can you two set the table?”

Will and El quickly got up to do just that, El making sure to screw the lid on the nail polish before gently setting it on the coffee table.

Joyce watched them go with a smile and crossed her arms over her chest as Hopper stood from the couch, his bones resisting the movement with loud pops and cracks.

“Got held up at work?”

Joyce rolled her eyes as they moved toward the kitchen. “Donald made me stay to fix his mistakes. As usual.”

“You’ve worked there long enough. Can’t you impeach him? Run the store yourself? You practically do anyway.”

Joyce hummed. She liked the sound of that. It’s true. Maybe she’ll change the name of the store to Byers’.

“Can I see?”

They stopped just inside the kitchen, Hopper lifting his left hand to show her El’s handiwork. The nail of his pinky finger painted a deep red. He lowered his voice as he spoke. “I hope she forgets about it, but knowing her, I’ll be ending the night with a few more done.”

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They ate dinner and took turns recounting their day. Joyce noticed that Jonathan had also been subject to a mini manicure more complete than Hopper’s, the polish matching Will’s.

Will had painted El’s nails the same color she painted Hopper’s and they were so meticulously done. Her boy was an artist after all. As El showed off her freshly painted nails to Joyce, she noticed the blue thread adorning her wrist. Joyce glanced over at Hopper, his sleeves rolled up, and made note.

After dinner, Joyce and El were still seated at the table, Joyce now getting her turn at the nail salon. El pushed the tiny bottles closer to Joyce, silently asking her to choose her preferred color.

“You pick.” El looked up at Joyce who gave her an encouraging

smile. "Go ahead, I'm happy with whatever you choose."

Joyce watched as El's eyes shifted back and forth between the two shades before choosing the darker of the two.

"I like this one." She pointed to the polish with a freshly manicured finger of the same shade.

"I like that one too."

El got to work as Joyce settled into her seat, holding her hand steady and making sure to thoroughly coat each nail. Every now and then she stopped to swipe a bit of nail polish away that made it out of the borders, something she seemed to have mastered since her trial run on Will.

Joyce looked over to the sink where Hopper and Will were quietly talking. Hopper started washing up after they finished dinner and Will had offered to help by drying the dishes. Seeing the pair side by side brought a smile to her face. Will looked so small next to Hopper, but at the same time, he had grown so much in the past year.

After Will was revived in the dusty alternate version of the library, Hopper carried him the whole trek back to the lab and until he was settled into the backseat of his truck. He had looked impossibly small then, weak and exhausted.

Then just the other month, Joyce was reliving the situation as they ran through the halls of the lab once more, Will in Hopper's arms, only this time, they were actively escaping danger. Since then, she thinks that Will experienced another growth spurt.

"Mom?" Jonathan came into view as he pulled his bag higher up on his shoulder. "I'm gonna go over to Nancy's, is that okay?"

"Sure, sweetheart," Joyce offered El her other hand as she spoke, "just be home by 11, please."

"Thanks, I will."

Hopper accepted the dish towel from Will and dried his hands off, tossing it over his shoulder, mirroring the look Jonathan sported just

an hour ago.

“Drive safe.”

Jonathan nodded to him, said goodbye to El, and was on his way.

Joyce admired her nails when El finished, impressed by the job she had done. “What’s your favorite color?”

“All of them.” El said matter of factly.

Joyce laughed and nodded. How could she expect her to pick just one? Will would have said the same thing. She decided then that she would pick up an array of polishes before coming home from work tomorrow, help her start a collection.

“Well, thank you for doing this. I don’t remember the last time I painted my nails.”

El placed her hands close to Joyce’s, their nails identical. “Pretty.” El’s voice was light and airy, the obvious ease and comfort she exhibited was such a welcome contrast to the cautious hesitation of the little girl she first met.

“You ladies done in here?” Hopper’s arm was propped up against the wall, most likely having been there long enough to catch the moment.

Joyce placed her hand on top of El’s and nodded at Hopper.

“Go ahead and hang out with Will, kid.” He patted his shirt pocket. “Once I’m done, we’re gonna head out.”

When this arrangement was still relatively new, El met Hopper with a bit of resistance when it came time to leave. But it was routine enough now that she knew she would be back. She no longer worried that this time would be the last she saw of the Byers.

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Joyce pulled her cardigan around her tighter as Hopper closed the front door behind him, cigarette already hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“When I got here, she was just finishing up with Jonathan.” Hopper laughed a little as he lit the cigarette. “Probably have to buy her some of that stuff. She needs more options if she wants happy customers.”

“I think she could work with one color and have the happiest customers of all.” Joyce moved to sit on the edge of the porch.

Hopper exhaled a billowing cloud of smoke. “Definitely.” He sat down beside Joyce with a grunt and held the cigarette out to her.

Instead of taking it, she wrapped her hand around his wrist, brushing her thumb across his pulse point. If she hadn’t noticed the bracelet on El earlier, she probably would never realize that it was no longer wrapped around him.

She never outright asked about the significance of the bracelet, but she knew. That first year he came back, she was stocking shelves while Donald manned the front of the store. He came for a pack of smokes and she could see the blue string as he tapped his fingers against his jeans. Since then, she can’t remember a time where he was without it.

Hopper grabbed the cigarette with his free hand and placed it in the ashtray he brought outside.

“When did you give it to her?”

Hopper stared down at their hands, watching Joyce’s thumb move back and forth across his skin.

“After Owens gave me the papers. The night that everything happened, we talked about her. By accident. I just brought her up without thinking about it.”

He looked up and stared off into the distance. The moon was dimmed by a curtain of clouds that moved in front of it slowly. Joyce watched him, his jaw clenching and unclenching.



They sat quietly for a few moments. Joyce's movements having since stopped, but she still held on. He took a deep breath and held it for a bit. Looked to her and slowly exhaled through barely parted lips, his breath materializing in the cold air surrounding them.

"She didn't want it at first. Said that I should keep it. But I told her that Sara would want her to have it." The sentence was clipped short, his voice slightly wavering. He cleared his throat and looked back down where the bracelet used to be.

"They're both so strong. I think they would've gotten along well."

Joyce moved her hand up from his wrist to properly hold onto Hopper's, giving it a strong squeeze to grab his attention.

"Yeah. They would. I know they would."

He gave her a small nod and squeezed back. They sat there for a few minutes, Hopper dropping his hand from Joyce's, his arm resting on her thigh to grip her knee, his warmth practically burning through the worn out denim.

"We should probably get going." He rubbed his hand up and down her leg to make sure she heard him, Joyce having leaned further into Hopper as they sat in silence.

Her eyes felt heavy with sleep and she wished they could stay like this a little longer. She turned and buried her face into the material of his shirt where her head rested against his upper arm before getting up. She opened the front door, calling the kids' attention, and watched as he slowly stood.

El came out first, stomping her feet against the floorboards to get her shoes on instead of untying the shoelaces. Once she was satisfied, she hugged Joyce without hesitation.

"Thank you." Her voice was muffled against Joyce's shoulder.

Joyce didn't know what specifically she was thanking her for, but she squeezed the girl a little tighter before releasing her to follow Hopper.

Joyce pulled Will in front of her, wrapping him up in her arms and resting her chin on his head which was proving more and more difficult with each passing day. She watched El and Hopper walk side by side, their steps perfectly in sync.

When she got to the passenger door, El turned to wave at the Byers one last time, the blue bracelet just barely noticeable in the moonlight.